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Unitarian Horizons

September 15, 1938

ACTIVE DOORWAYS

ON a hot July afternoon this summer, I was looking for a place to park my Ford in that section of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which lies near the wharf from which the steamer leaves for Star Island. In a quiet back street, more like an alley than a street, I discovered what looked like an ideal spot for my purpose, until I glanced at the building in front of which I

was proposing to stop, and saw a sign which read, "No Parking. Active Doorway."

The first two words caused a moment or two of natural irritation; but this was quickly dispelled by the intriguing possibilities, for a preacher, of the last two words. Like the warhorse in the Book of Job, who paws the ground and says "Ha, ha!" when he smells the battle afar, I found myself champing at the bit to preach a sermon on the theme of Active Doorways. As it happened, I was on my way to give a talk on "Poetry and Religion," and I couldn't see how I was going to make use of my new idea on that occasion. So I decided to think in terms of Unitarian Horizons rather than of a sermon!

HEADQUARTERS DOORWAY

AND that reminded me that for a year now several thousand copies of this little publication have been going out to people all over the country, each bearing a picture of the doorway which leads to the headquarters of the Unitarian denomination in Boston. It wasn't accident or mere caprice that chose that doorway to stand at the head of this monthly communication from the desk of the president of the Association to his fellow Unitarians. There was deliberate intention behind the choice, and I have been

meaning for a long time to speak of the purpose which led me to ask the artist to draw the picture as he did. The sign in the Portsmouth back street gives me just the clue and just the stimulus I needed.

If there is any doorway in the United States of America that ought to be an "active" doorway, it is the one that forms the entrance to 25 Beacon Street, and during the past year the officers of the Association have tried conscientiously to make it so. Thus far, however, only a beginning can be reported. We propose to carry on during the coming year with increased energy, until every Unitarian in the land knows that this particular doorway is active in a sense that has direct and personal significance for every individual and every parish within our growing and widening fellowship. The picture of our headquarters doorway on each copy of Unitarian Horizons is intended as an invitation—to callers, to letters, to telegrams (when the need is urgent).

THE HUMAN TOUCH

PERHAPS only those of us who actually work inside the headquarters building can realize the very practical difficulty of carrying on efficiently the immense amount of business which flows in and out of our various offices with-

out losing sight of the need for the more personal and human considerations. Nothing is easier than for a denominational officer to let himself become so absorbed in the details of his work, so swamped by the multiplicity of problems that come to his desk, that he forgets the fundamental purpose of all his endeavors. The old saying about the woods and the trees has special appropriateness for us at headquarters. There are only twenty-four hours in the day, only seven days in the week, and only twelve months in the year. Of course! And there are fixed limits to the amount of physical and nervous and spiritual energy which any man or woman possesses. To be sure! But nevertheless, to lose the human touch in our daily relations with one another—and especially with those whom we are put here to serve—is inexcusable.

Practical difficulties are never an excuse for inaction, or for failure to keep one's main purpose clearly and steadily in mind. They are merely a test of our ingenuity and of our seriousness of purpose. They can never constitute a valid reason for taking down the "Active Doorway" sign from the front of our Unitarian Building—or from the entrance to any of our regional offices, or from the doorway of any of our churches.

EVEN IN THE SUMMER

YES, even during the summer months, when our American habit of long vacations seems to have conquered almost all of us. Common sense dictates a lighter schedule, but does not justify "shutting up shop." Of course there is need for vacations—and rather specially, I believe, for ministers. But I must confess to a deep-seated feeling of uneasy discontent whenever I think of the number of churches that close their doors before the end of June and keep them closed until after Labor Day. So far as I know, we have no definite statistics about our Unitarian churches in regard to this matter of summer closing, but my guess would be that something like sixty per cent of them are closed for at least eight weeks each summer; and that seems to me a pity. Cars could park in front of their doorways without being disturbed, even on Sunday mornings; and the announcement that "services will be resumed on September 11" doesn't seem to help much. The effect of a doorway that is labelled "inactive" is plainly depressing; and it seems to imply that the kind of religion to be found inside—when the sea and the lakes and the mountains no longer offer their summer allurements—will prove to be mild and inactive too.

PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES?

HERE also there are many difficulties in the way, as I happen to know perfectly well. As a parish minister, I never succeeded in persuading my Board of Trustees that the church should maintain services every Sunday of the year. But difficulties are seldom insurmountable; and, furthermore, there are some of our churches that do stay open throughout the entire year. I know more than one church that can boast of never having been closed on Sunday since it was founded. Practical difficulties, as I said a moment ago, in another connection, are a test of our ingenuity and our seriousness of purpose—and they are nothing more. They never constitute a valid reason for inaction.

The root of the matter lies in the palpable fact that we don't care enough about it to find the way to keep our churches open. We are mostly satisfied to let custom dictate our policy, salving our consciences with one form or another of pleasant rationalizing. "Our minister needs at least two months of complete rest, if he is to keep up his high level of preaching during the year." "Religion isn't a matter of going to church, anyway, and we can worship in the country as well as in the city." "It's hard enough to raise the budget now, and it isn't fair to ask our people to give more just for the sake of keeping services going

for the few who could come during the summer." "Everyone starts in with much more enthusiasm in the fall, if they have had a long vacation from church during the summer."

Quite so. It's all true. And yet—

TURN OF THE TIDE

SOMETHING very big and very exciting is taking place in our Unitarian fellowship, the effect of which will, I am convinced, be felt with increasing and decisive power in these next few years. It isn't in the realm of organization, or in the realm of finance. It isn't primarily a matter of intellectual belief or of theological speculation. It is more like a revival of faith, a renewal of the deep underlying convictions and loyalties which create and sustain all forms of organized religion. The tide has turned—the Tide of the Spirit.

You can see the signs of this revival of faith and this renewal of the deep sense of spiritual need in many places. Already it is beginning to create new forms and generate new enthusiasm. Take, as a single example, the demand which led Horace Westwood to write his pioneering little book, "This Do and Live," and the widespread response which is making it a living force in the hearts of individuals and parishes everywhere. Any church

that desires to renew its grasp upon the fundamentals of free religion, and to learn how to put faith into daily practice, should make that book the basis for a year's intensive study. Adult education in our Unitarian churches can begin right there.

Among the fruits of this revival will be the opening of many doors that now are closed; and after a while there will be no Unitarian church, or office, whose doorway will not be active. And, best of all, we shall have forgotten that we ever considered it anything but a happy privilege to have a part in keeping those doorways active in the service of our fellowmen.

F. M. E.

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